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ABSTRACT

Fontbonne College's academic dean and vice president for academic affairs appointed a task force in August 1997 to investigate, over the course of one year, ways in which the library's development could be centered in teaching and learning. More specifically, the task force was to determine how library and information services could be rooted in the college's curricula an individual teaching and learning needs. This document represents the final report of the task force. Highlights of the report include: a statement of the problem; three proposals for the solution; operationalizing the solution; the creation of learning support teams; providing an additional credit hour for technology training activities; the implementation strategy; the timetable; and funding. (AEF)

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Fontbonne College
St. Louis, Missouri

The Learner and the Library
Library Task Force: Final Report
May 1998

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INTRODUCTION

In August 1997, the college's academic dean and vice president for academic affairs, Sr. Joan Lescinski, appointed a task force to investigate, over the course of one year, ways in which the library's development could be centered in teaching and learning. More specifically, the task force was to determine how library and information services could be rooted in the college's curricula and individual teaching and learning needs. Six faculty members and a student representative were appointed: Mary Abkemeier, Professor of Mathematics and Computer Science, Charles Massey (student representative), Joseph McDonald (chair), Assistant Professor and Director of Library, Ling Thumin, Instructor and Reference and Periodicals Librarian, Jean Wasko, Professor of English, Daryl Wennemann, Assistant Professor of Philosophy, and Janie von Wolfseck, Professor of Communication Disorders.

THE PROBLEM

Like most, perhaps all, institutions of higher learning, Fontbonne College continues to wrestle with questions about student learning. What knowledge, competencies, and attitudes are subsumed within Fontbonne's commitments to its students, as expressed in its catalog? How are knowledge and competencies and attitudes interrelated, and how can students be helped to understand and appreciate the essential "wholeness" of learning, even in the face of the fragmentation which formal structures for learning (e.g., curricula) so often create and perpetuate?

And how does learning take place in college? What conditions and what pedagogies and learning activities really help students gain this knowledge and these competencies and attitudes? How can students be encouraged to engage with information in active, independent ways, and how can they be supported and guided as they do so? If extensive one-on-one teaching/mentoring is not feasible within the structure of higher education today, how can students be offered the individualized attention and guidance their individual learning needs and learning styles require?

Concern for active, independent thinking and learning, of course, is not unique to Fontbonne. As a goal, it is heard again and again from many sectors of the population, including parents who want to be sure that the dollars they invest in their child's education are likely to bring a lasting return, from students who are tired of seeing education as a series of hoops to be jumped through, and from employers and graduate schools who want to be able to expect that the students who graduate from college are competent, independent, and continuing learners.

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Fontbonne recognizes that independent learners do not come into being at the moment of graduation. Instead, they are challenged, they are nurtured, and they are specifically and personally supported over and over again through a long and sometimes painful course of study. With their first encounter with the college (as with their first encounter with formal established education), students need to be given the opportunity to manipulate information, to struggle with its validity, and to consider its organization and implications. That is, students need to be independently engaged with information from the very beginning of their experience at Fontbonne. But they also need to be supported in this engagement in real and concrete ways that explicitly promote the development of richer, ever more "useful," ever more confidently applied understandings and skills.

Historically, the library, and more recently, academic computing services, have been the *loci* of independent learning activities on campus. Of the two, computing services have received more attention as enablers of independent, lifelong learning than has the library. But as education and culture increasingly rely on the computer for lifelong learning/information support, more difficulties will become apparent.

For example, one issue discussed at length in the April 3, 1998 issue of *Science* is the recent discovery of the inability of the Internet search services, the "search engines", to uncover more than a small fraction of information on a given subject, available on the ' Net (as low as 3% for Lycos). Furthermore, a significant proportion of the links provided is broken or no longer valid. In similar fashion, the American college library, as it has moved away from an exclusive concern for "collections" toward "information literacy", has been unable to establish itself as a significant player in the curricula of higher education. For example, in the CSEQ study conducted by the college's assessment committee, in the spring, 1997, very large numbers of junior students revealed they never or occasionally used the library for such academic staples as developing a bibliography (60%), using indices to journal articles (83%), or reading basic references or documents (97%).

SOLUTION

It is these critical student needs—on the one hand, for consistent curricular and pedagogical challenge, and, on the other hand, for continuing close attention and support—that lead the task force to its recommendations. The members read related literature, met periodically for discussion, and teaching faculty completed a course-related assignment, discussed below. Based on its work, the task force makes three proposals for sets of activities it believes will help the college move forward with its library- and information-related academic responsibilities. These are:

- Engage in the systematic instruction of students in the use of information bearing materials and related technology.

- Establish an additional one credit "information use" option added to appropriate existing and new courses.

- Develop, for possible extramural funding, a five-year program to assist the faculty in identifying and analyzing their own and their students use of both formal (library, a/v, and computer-based) and informal information sources as the foundation for the creation of specific products and services focused on meeting those information needs.

OPERATIONALIZING THE SOLUTION

The core issue, which faces Fontbonne College's administrators, faculty, librarians, and computer specialists, is not the information resources themselves (as traditional library and information science would argue). Rather, it is the information they contain and how that and all other information is identified, retrieved, evaluated, and applied in answering questions, in completing tasks, and in solving problems. The issue is not who will own or manage formal information resources, nor even how they will be organized and made accessible to potential users, but how those users will learn when and for what purposes they need information of all sorts, and how they will learn to use it. This issue transcends the library or academic computing lab; it even transcends the bounds of any individual classroom. In fact, it is a curricular issue, flowing directly from what our students need to learn and how we will teach it. And that teaching and learning must occur, not within the essentially false and artificial bounds of a library, or even of a library plus computers. It must occur within the real, rich, complex information environment in which our students live now and will need to live and function as they leave our campus to practice their disciplines.

Although we recognize that much of the most critical student learning actually occurs outside of the classroom, Fontbonne College, like many other institutions, has placed most of its most valuable student learning resource—the teacher—inside the classroom. The assumption underlying this deployment of resources is that much of the content of learning (i.e., much of the information and most of the explanation and evaluation of that information) will come from the teacher. To the extent that this is true, placing the teacher in the classroom, in front of a group of students, is a very efficient way to facilitate learning.

Nevertheless, it is clear that much learning also occurs outside the classroom, and that much learning needs to occur outside the classroom. In the end, if "learning" is to have a lasting effect, it must change the student is a lasting way. That is, the student must, at some point in the learning process, become engaged with information in an independent way, must take primary responsibility for collecting, evaluating, and using that information, rather than passively accepting content presented by the teacher.

To a certain degree, this goes on as students study for an examination: the information in their lecture notes or in their text has to become their own, at some level. Frequently, however, this becomes merely an exercise in returning to the teacher what the teacher had earlier given to the student. In an effort to move the student beyond this point into more "independent" grappling with information, many faculty assign term papers, oral reports, and other types of independent study opportunities. In these activities, students are sent "out" of the classroom to find, evaluate, and use information "on their own".

Where will the student find the help and direction and guidance required for classroom-independent learning? How are strong students challenged in this process, and then encouraged to be even better, and how are weaker students helped to see the mistakes they are making and then helped to correct them? *Is it sufficient, if these activities are designed to help students test and refine their thinking and communicating, just to assign an "A" to a better final product, and a "D" to a poor one and to assume that the act of independently generating the product was as meaningful a "learning experience" for every student as it could have been?* How can this critical element of learning—learning through independent work—be really guided and supported if the college's most valuable resource—the teacher—is committed to the classroom?

LEARNING SUPPORT TEAMS

The library task force asks the college to create and implement (if necessary, with outside funding for release time and honoraria, as discussed below) a learning support structure which will begin to move significant resources directly into the learning interface between student and information. The first task is to provide support to faculty as they examine and redesign their information-based pedagogies and learning activities, and the second is to offer formal, structured support to students as they grapple with the problems of finding, evaluating, and applying information through these activities. Specifically, the task force recommends that the college establish a Learning Support Team which will work with faculty members, individually, on the special problems and learning opportunities their courses offer. The team should be composed of a teacher/writing specialist, a computer/education specialist, a librarian, and a coordinator/facilitator, most likely the library director. The goal of this joint effort is a significant change in the learning process such that students become more actively and more successfully engaged with information during the course. One of the outcomes of such a change should be better products (e.g., better papers and reports) which, at least to a first approximation, can be interpreted to mean better learning.

Together, the faculty member and the Learning Support Team will consider such questions as: What are the key learning outcomes for this course? What are the significant learning activities? What are the learning objectives for these activities, and how do they relate to the learning objectives for the course as a whole? What kinds of competencies do these activities assume students possess and what kinds of competencies do they help students develop? What kinds of mistakes do students make in completing these activities and what kinds of problems do they encounter? To what extent are the learning objectives for the activities realized by the students? And, how could the structure of the activities and/or the support available to the student be improved to help students be more successful in realizing the learning goals the teacher has set?

Following this extended review, the faculty member and the learning support team will redesign and implement new learning experiences that are more holistic in nature, activities which take the student from the assignment, through the learning process, and to the outcome, in a supported and directed way. For example, a faculty member might decide to have

students submit progressive drafts of a major term paper through e-mail, and then to use voice annotation to raise questions for the student to consider and provide other important direction while the paper is "in process". Alternatively, a speech teacher might simply ask that audiovisual services provide a way for students to videotape themselves as they practice their speeches, so that students will be able to experience directly the value of critiquing and editing their own work, even over and over again, as necessary. Or, another teacher might require students completing a research project to meet, in sequence, one or more members of the learning support team: the librarian, the computer-education specialist, and finally the teacher/writing specialist so that each person could individually help the student make midstream corrections to the project as the work is ongoing.

Although it is likely that most of these redesigned assignments will involve encounters with formally organized information and will require the use of information technology, the focus of this work is not, simply, the increased use of computers and libraries in teaching and learning. Rather, it is intended, first, to bring together a knowledgeable group of people (faculty member plus the learning support team) to develop and implement core effective strategies for bringing the student into meaningful contact with information. And, it is intended, second, to place an effective leaning support team right at the point where the student is expected to learn independently. *We do not place students in the classroom and expect them to do much learning without the teacher. Neither should we place students in the larger information environment and expect them to do much learning without access to qualified direction and support.*

It is also important to note that the goal of these activities is not faculty development, as such, though faculty and course development will inevitably occur as instructors work with the learning support team to identify and solve their students' information-related problems. Rather, the goal is to offer holistic help to the student who is learning to become an independent learner.

THE ONE CREDIT OPTION

A very useful result of the learning support team review and of the subsequent implementation efforts is that college will be able to identify more precisely the kinds of training in library or information-seeking and technology skills its students need. It can then develop separate training opportunities for them or, preferred by the task force, integrate the skills development within existing courses, under the leadership of the Curriculum Committee, to assure continuity and compatibility. We suggest that the general studies review effort, now getting underway, carefully consider ways to assure that students acquire needed basic computer and information handling skills in their first two years, or equivalent, of college work.

The task force recommends that credits for 100 and 200 level courses, which carry with them "training" activities and any course in which there are significant, additional information handling activities, be increased by one credit hour. We recommend that ways to

implement this additional credit hour be discussed with the registrar. Also, recognizing that the general studies inquiry may take a few years, we suggest that current ad-hoc training efforts continue, allowing the learning support teams to gather the experience which can inform both the general studies effort and the upper level course development.

IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGY

There are several reasons for proposing to conduct the learning support team activities over five years. As the college is making information technology broadly available, it is likely that this will bring about a significant change in the attitudes of the entire academic community about Fontbonne's ability to gain and to benefit from these resources. As the college has recognized the challenges it faces in these areas, it has taken steps to bring about such changes as it can afford (e.g., new computers and peripherals and Mary Abkemeier's work). But this infusion of significant resources in the form of equipment and training will inevitably raise hopes and expectations across the entire academic community at Fontbonne, and will create a climate in which faculty will be able to see tangible results from their investment of time and effort.

And second, as faculty gain the physical resources themselves, and they begin to use these resources in their own work, it is very likely, almost inevitable, perhaps, that they will begin to see ways in which these resources can be used to support and to enhance their teaching. As these ideas emerge, it will be important that the college be able to respond to them in ways that will encourage and promote the transition from idea to implementation, from a sense of how these technologies might be useful to student learning to its full realization.

TIMETABLE

The learning support team activities should be conducted in a cyclical manner in which

- faculty are first identified to be a part of the program for a specific year (first year of their involvement)
- each faculty member, in consultation with the coordinator (working with the curriculum committee), will identify a course which he or she would like to work on (first year of their involvement)
- the learning support team, together with the faculty member will analyze the targeted course for information content and opportunities to introduce active learning components (second year of their involvement)
- the faculty member, again, together with the learning support team, will design and write instructional materials for the new activity (summer after their first year)
- the faculty member and learning support team will consider what additional support the team could give to students completing the activity (summer), and
- the activity and the new support are tested with a new group of students taking the same course in the following year

The schedule is extended over roughly one and a half academic years (or two years for courses taught in a two year cycle) in order to give faculty sufficient opportunities to interact with the learning support team and to reflect on the issues the experience raise for them. Each faculty member should be paid a $1,000 stipend for her or his involvement.

FUNDING

It is beyond the scope of this report to develop a budget for this project. Furthermore, we recognize there are different ways to implement a program that provides students with learning support and builds library and information resource development out of teaching and learning concerns. Nevertheless, we also recognize there are costs associated with such a program.

Fundamentally, our recommendations ask the college to look at the library and information resources (specifically, academic computing) in a different way. We ask the college to reconsider how these academic assets can best be employed and how tuition monies can better be spent by requiring both the library and academic computing to have a single-minded focus on student learning success. Significant change can be accomplished with existing college budget appropriations. Nevertheless, extramural money for honoraria or released time, training activities, and possibly, temporary staff, are probably needed to make the program most useful, in the long term.

One funding organization whose purposes appear to coincide with the needs outlined in this report is the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS). The IMLS is an independent agency within the executive branch of the federal government, established in 1996 by Congress to improve museum, library, and information services. In fiscal 1998, the IMLS lists among its funding priorities in training and R&D, 1) projects to educate and train library and information science professionals currently employed in the field, in the areas of emerging technologies, 2) projects that enhance library services through the effective and efficient use of appropriate and emerging technologies, and, 3) projects that create methods to evaluate the contributions to a community made by institutions providing access to information services.

Another possible source of funding is the Fund for the Improvement of Post Secondary Education (FIPSE). Although FIPSE awards are notoriously difficult to obtain, the activities outlined in this report would seem to fit with FIPSE's interest in new and innovative projects with clear and sustainable improvement goals, which can be transferred to other institutions. Similarly, the guidelines for the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) Education Development and Demonstration grant, suggest that this NEH program would fund some of the activities outlined in this report.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

As presently constituted library materials and services appear to have little relationship to student learning success in Fontbonne College. Library and teaching faculty members do little communicating between themselves on learning and pedagogical issues affecting the

college's students. This failure is especially acute in matters related to students' efforts in extra-classroom and independent learning. Although an effort has been mounted to bring information technology into the classroom, to date, these activities have not involved the library, in any significant degree, except as one place to locate technology.

There are many reasons for the distance between the "library" and the "classroom". Historically, the rise of librarian professionalism has tended to isolate librarians from their teaching colleagues, just as professionalism has tended to isolate one discipline from another, on campus. Professionalism and isolation from teaching and learning led, naturally enough, to the rise of the "discipline" of librarianship. It is common to hear among academic librarians expressions such as, we do not tell the English department what to do, they do not tell us what to do. We, the librarians, know what is best for the collection and we know best how to help students and faculty make the best use of the collection, whether through cataloging, reference activities, bibliographic instruction, or, most recently, through information seeking skills instruction. Many librarians refer to the academic library as a "second curriculum", paralleling the college's academic curriculum. However, most librarians and academic information specialists have not been trained to deal with learning and pedagogical issues and have no experience in curriculum development or classroom instruction.

But teaching faculty in American colleges must also bear some of the responsibility for the library's lack of significant contribution to student learning success. Classroom instructors have been quite willing to accept librarians' co-option of a major campus intellectual resource and readily acquiesce when librarians assert their "right" to define the book and journal collections. More importantly, teaching methods and learning expectations in many institutions are marked by a reluctance to do more than "cover the material" and engage academic information resources in superficial and simplistic ways, ignoring the very important matters of extra-classroom and independent student learning.

To deal with these problems and to help the college use its resources in a better and more creative way, the library task force recommends the college create a learning support team composed of library and teaching faculty with specific skills. The central task of the team is to support students in the use and application of information resources in their independent, extra-classroom learning activities. Initially, to gain experience, the team will focus on one course taught by each instructor, analyzing it and the teacher's pedagogy and student learning expectations. Eventually, all teachers will be consulted on the "information" and extra-classroom support their students require and which is implied by the content of every course they teach.

The task force recognizes that to be fully successful, this recommendation must be accompanied by significant librarian and academic information professional development and retraining, not unlike that present in the world of work outside academia. For this reason and to establish the early success of the learning support teams and what their work implies, the task force further recommends the college search for extramural financial support to pay for the initial development and implementation of this program.

Finally, the task force recommends that the college, under the leadership and direction of the curriculum committee and largely informed by the learning support team, engage in the systematic instruction of students in the use of information bearing materials and related technology. In most instances, we believe it is better, that is, more defensible educationally, to associate this instruction with the needs of specific courses (e.g., the need to create spreadsheets present in certain accounting and statistics courses.) Where this imposes a significant "overload", we recommend the course carry an additional one-hour credit, analogous to science courses with lab requirements.

This report was prepared and written by Joseph McDonald

Respectfully submitted,

Joseph McDonald
Chair